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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use of film in teaching the composing process to students. Beginning with a description of the composing process in general, it continues with a discussion of problem-solving, composing, and film, using "The Shopping Bag Lady" as an illustrative film. This is followed by a consideration of how to use film to generate form in the prewriting stage of composing and some specific suggestions for its use in the directing of the middle or writing stages of composing. The paper concludes with a description of the advantages of using short films in writing classes. (TJ)

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"USING FILM WITHIN THE COMPOSING PROCESS: PREWRITING AND WRITING"

Joseph J. Comprone

I

(What Is The Composing Process?)

Quick scanning of the program of this conference, the sessions of the MLA's Division of Writing, and the tables of content in those professional journals that deal primarily with the theory and practice of teaching writing provide convincing evidence that developing concepts of the composing process have and will continue to be a if not the central issue in current rhetorical research. Those of us who are interested in using film to teach composing need to progress from our so-far essentially theoretical or practical approaches to film as rhetoric into a phase of research where the integration of theory and practice within the composing process becomes our primary objective.

Let me begin with what I hope will prove a useful, working definition of the composing process, drawn from several areas of research, whether the more practical and inductive research of those like Janet Emig who examine the cognitive-affective behavior of student-writers as they compose or the more theoretical work in heuristics of those like Richard Young and Linda Flower, who have, among other achievements, constructed cognitive models such as problem-solving that they believe match the thought-processes of composers across many disciplines.

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Above all, an understanding of writing as process has taught us what writing is not. It is not simply putting words on a page; it includes complex stages of perception, conception, and reconception within an expanding sense of rhetorical context. Words on a page are generated and appear to readers in linear patterns; ideas in the mind and, usually, in talk or discussion are not produced linearly. Rather, what the most current researchers into the composing process are saying when they describe what composers do is that the process is recursive and cyclical, that basic or controlling concepts are refracted and revised through associations and contrasts of perceived experience and developing ideas, where language is used more as a probe or tool to remake ideas than as a transcribing instrument.

II

(Problem-Solving, Composing, and Film)

Problem-solving or task-analysis, one among many recently studied heuristic models, provides a simple yet clarifying methaphor for the composing process. A writer begins with a thought an idea, however general. He or she composes by using language as a means of passing that thought through experience, refracting, shaping, adding, deleting, finding illustrative details, always working toward the complete articulation of a problem. Work in heuristics indicates how

an initial general response, in our case--to a film or an element in a film--might be probed by systematic sequences of questions, sharpening and focusing the writers grasp of the conflict at the center of the concept. This probing and shaping of a conceptualized response to a film might take the form of the following hypothetical prewriting sequence, based on the short film "The Shopping Bag Lady." An abstract of the film is included at the end of this essay.

Response to Film: The Shopping Bag Lady shows how young and old can turn potential conflict into understanding.

Essential Opposition that Might Develop from a Probing of this Response:

1. the young/the old
2. conflict/understanding
3. the film/the writer's experience
4. change/stasis

At this point, the teacher might turn students back to patterns of perceived experiences in the film, arranged according to the above-described general oppositions.

Pattern one: the old woman's attempt to create a meaningful life by using discarded artifacts (a doll that she makes into a child, discarded pieces of paper and toys that become her "household items"); the adolescent's sense of loneliness as displayed in her sterile school environment, her facial expressions in close-up as she moves from school to friends to home

Pattern two: the initial conflict between old and young woman as portrayed in scenes in which the old woman's seemingly-senile conversations with her doll are overheard by the young woman; the subsequent scenes in which old and young woman come to see each other's loneliness, as portrayed in the young woman's growing appreciation of what the doll means and how it represents both women's loneliness in a large city

Pattern three: the images in the film, such as the signs of institutions and rituals in the lives of the women, that reinforce the idea that people cannot change; the images in the film that reinforce change, such as signs of growth in Central Park and the final scene in which the old and young woman meet in a hospital room surrounded by other old people and express signs of hope in their facial expressions and gestures.

This working list, obviously not conclusive, summarizes a process in which the student's immediate perception of the film generates a controlling concept that, in turn, is probed with perceived details, resulting in a reformed and expanded, controlling concept, expressed in this introductory paragraph.

> The Shopping Bag Lady, with its careful contrast of images of rejection and acceptance, brings the viewer from a recognition of how old and young are often put in conflict with one another by the forced separation they experience in their daily lives. Both protagonists learn by the end of the film to see into each other's lives and to identify with the other's isolation and loneliness.

CLOSE SPACE

III

Using Film to Generate Form in the Writing Stage of Composing

Because a good deal has been done on using film to control the perceptual, inventive processes of students during prewriting stages, I shall not elaborate any further on problem-solving as it encourages the forming of ideas before writing, except to remark that the ideas and details described above might have been elaborated upon over several classes, with students recalling specific perceptions and discussing them in ways that would develop the controlling concept. In process, the film would be viewed once, discussed, and viewed a second time and discussed, with the writing of general propositions and descriptive or illustrative sentences.

If, however, we accept the current recursive cyclical definition of the composing process, we know that invention and perceptual redefinition do not end with prewriting. Rather actual writing begins when the writer starts to develop the controlling concept and the patterns of observed details into longer pieces of discourse, using heuristic questions such as the following to control writing behavior:

Heuristics for the Directing of the Middle or
Writing Stages of Composing, Using Film

1. What particular personal experiences can the writer relate to the controlling concept and patterns of supporting ideas that were developed during prewriting?

2. Will the writer emphasize the shared perception of the controlling idea, or will the emphasis be placed on developing a solution to a perceived problem?

3. What are the formal implications of the previous question for the writer?

4. Are there still inherent potentials for change in the controlling concept and perceived patterns of detail?

5. In relation to the previous question, what in the writer's own experience has the potential to alter the controlling concept?

6. In relation to question four, what additional perceptions of the film have the potential of altering the controlling concept?

These general questions, refined and specified to develop particular topics, would then initiate what I shall call the middle or actual writing stage of composing. Following Kenneth Burke's dictum that form is best defined as the writer's creating and fulfilling of expectations in readers, this middle stage would include a series of small-group workshops and sequenced, short writings in

which each writer's controlling concept and patterns of supporting details would interact with those of other students. Related personal experience, selected outside readings on the film's general subject, and in-class discoveries made as students compared perceived details and controlling concepts would provide the focus of earlier writing-stage activities; later, students would build on these activities to accomplish the transition from general notes on controlling concept and refined patterns of observed details to longer pieces of discourse, most likely paragraphs, through the first completed draft of an essay.

Between the earlier oral and short-writing stages of actual writing and the later, longer-discourse stage of drafting, the film would be shown a third time, allowing students to relate their ideas and observations back to specific shots, scenes, and techniques in the film. A writing course in which film was consistently used as a metaphor for composing would provide students with a limited and basic technical vocabulary (shot, scene, sequence, close, medium, and long shots, establishing shots, and some terms that the class itself might evolve for describing lighting effects and angles) and a carefully-specified but limited group of general, rhetorical-critical terms (image, symbol, tone, attitude and purpose, context, repetition and pattern, connotation and denotation, style as choice) that would be used to accomplish the following writing-stage objectives.

1. Rework the controlling concept so that it makes a proposition on the film or a part of it.

2. Examine the proposition so that the writer discovers within it a potential form for his or her writing.

3. Write groups of paragraphs that divide the proposition into subordinate propositions with patterns of observed details used as support.

4. Develop a clear sense of general purpose (still leaving specific purpose to the revising stage of composing), particularly a sense of whether the writer will emphasize the sharing of an aspect of his or her own experience of the film or will argue a proposition based on the film. The former would result in more emphasis on detailed description and controlled point of view; the latter would condense descriptive and narrative material into packages of support for argumentative propositions.

What advantages does film give us as writing teachers as we bring the students through the middle or writing stage of the composing process? First, the film itself is a controlled, composed slice of human experience. It occurs before us, teachers and students, in the classroom. It allows, even encourages, students to see language (visual signs and symbols, narrative voices and dialogue) as manipulated and controlled by a composer (the filmmaker), and, when teachers carefull place the showing of short films to allow for various kinds of response by students, films show the would-be composer, perhaps better than any other medium, how finished product and the audience's experience of the composition can develop from the rhetorical choices made by a composer. The immediate, total experience of sharing in a film's world, in other words, becomes

the writer's metaphor for his or her readers, especially when a short film, viewed a second and third time during the process of composing an essay, is examined in detail after being experienced as a whole.

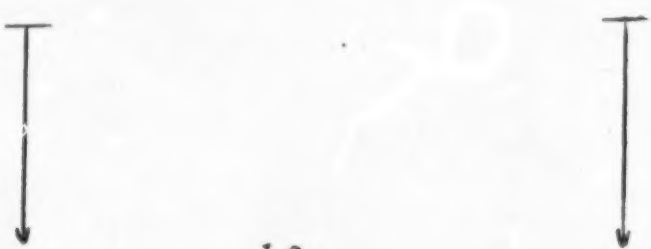
But the advantages of using short film in a writing class go far beyond those advantages that accrue from the film medium itself. Returning to recent research or the composing process, we can say as writing teachers who use film that our contrastive and comparative use of the media encourages the kind of complex treatment of the cyclical stages of writing that I outlined earlier.

1. It encourages the student to move back and forth between perceived experience and tentatively-written product.

2. It encourages a sequential staging of written products, with brief one-sentence responses interspersing with rough paragraphs in pre-writing and early-writing stages and more polished, edited, and lengthy versions during the later stages of composing. All composing occurs with the film available for showing and analysis and with the benefit of oral as well as practice-written composing.

3. It encourages the integrating of oral and written composing, as James Moffett encouraged several years ago by encouraging the constant interaction of talking and writing.

4. Finally and most importantly, film as part of the composing process helps us as teachers to treat composing as an extended act of perception and invention, through every stage in the writing process.



"THE SHOPPING BAG LADY"

(Brief Abstract)

An old woman (Mildred Dunnock) and a high-school girl serve as co-protagonists in this film in which a woman whose life is symbolized by the discarded toys and household remnants in her shopping bag at first struggles with and then is able to reconcile her life with a younger woman. Set in central park, the film uses a series of episodic scenes, each of which is carefully juxtaposed and includes contrast with visual background (school, park, hospital), to make a brief parable about aging, loneliness, and occasional but saving reconciliation. At first, the young woman shares with her high-school peers an attitude that ridicules the older woman's attempts to confront loneliness with the discarded artifacts of other people's lives. Gradually, however, the less-obvious loneliness of the younger woman becomes explicit and the basis for a common understanding between the two is established. The film closes with a hospital scene in which the younger woman returns the lost artifacts (a doll and its bottle) and the shopping bag to the older woman.

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Ordering Information on "The Shopping Bag Lady:"

Mass Media Ministries
2116 North Charles St.
Baltimore, Maryland 21218

(Rental Fee - $25.00, Time of Film is 21 minutes)

11